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ABSTRACT

Current recommendations for achieving high quality professional development for teachers include the creation of a professional learning community wherein each member of the educational community--student, teacher, parent, community, principal, and staff--is both teacher and learner. Key to the success of this approach, however, is the role of the peer mentor or coach. This study was designed to determine what it takes to be a successful professional development coach by gathering data based on the perspectives and experiences of 31 peer coaches. Results suggest that, while content expertise is important, coaches must possess strong interpersonal skills in order to build trusting relationships with teachers. These relationships, then, enable coaches to use their content expertise to facilitate changes in teachers' practice. Suggestions for selecting and training peer coaches are included. (Contains 25 references.) (Author/SM)

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Content Expertise or Interpersonal Skills?

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Critical Characteristics of Professional Development Coaches:

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ABSTRACT

Current recommendations for achieving high quality professional development for teachers include the creation of a professional learning community wherein each member of the educational community – student, teacher, parent, community, principal, and staff – is both teacher and learner. Key to the success of this approach, however, is the role of the peer mentor or coach. This study was designed to determine what it takes to be a successful professional development coach, by gathering data based on the perspectives and experiences of 31 peer coaches. Results suggest that, while content expertise is important, coaches must possess strong interpersonal skills in order to build trusting relationships with teachers. These relationships, then, enable coaches to use their content expertise to facilitate changes in teachers' practice. Suggestions for selecting and training peer coaches are included.

While it is generally agreed that professional development is necessary for today's teachers as they confront the challenges of teaching in a climate of reform, what remains in dispute is the most effective method for achieving this goal (Guskey, 1995; Lee, 2001; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003; National Foundation for the Improvement of Education, 1996). Traditionally, the improvement of teaching practices has been left to individual teachers working in isolation, perhaps coming together for a workshop, seminar, or lecture-based training session, but the outcomes have not been as promising as hoped (Pierce & Hunsaker, 1996). New definitions of professional development, currently being advocated by state and national professional organizations (e.g., Arizona Education Association, 2003; National Staff Development Council, 2001), as well as governmental and funding agencies (e.g., U. S. Department of Education, 2000, 2001), characterize professional development as a systemic, intentional process, involving multiple members of the educational community, with a clear focus on the improvement of student learning.

In order to reach this end, recent professional development efforts have moved away from an emphasis on skills training to the "establishment of new norms of collegiality, experimentation, and risk-taking by promoting open discussion of issues, shared understandings, and a common vocabulary" (Grant, 1996, ¶6). This form of development is based on the assumption that teachers are productive, responsible members of a professional community who facilitate their own renewal, as well as the renewal of their schools, through active participation in the community (Grant, 1996; Little, 1993).

The establishment of a professional learning community as a means to renew both teachers and schools is a common recommendation in the current professional development literature. For example, in 2001, the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) revised their standards for professional development, originally published in 1995, to reflect these new ideas, placing more emphasis on organizational development and coherence in planning. Listed first among their 12 revised standards was the acknowledgement that effective staff development "organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district" (NSDC, 2001, Standard 1).

One strategy for teacher development particularly well suited to the formation of a professional learning community is that of peer coaching, defined as the process of two teachers working together in and out of the classroom to plan instruction, develop support materials, and watch one another work with students (Swafford, 1998). Peer coaching is non-evaluative, based on classroom observation followed by feedback, and intended to improve specific instructional techniques (Skinner & Welch, 1996; Valencia & Killion, 1998).

Although peer coaching can take many forms, the specific approach adopted in this study was that of cognitive coaching, defined as the "nonjudgmental mediation of thinking" (Costa & Garmston, 2002, p. 12). Garmston (1992) explained that cognitive coaching is "a commitment to the development of the mind of the teacher as a central focus of a school's staff development program and the promotion of a new school culture in which collegiality, risk taking, honest communication, and experimentation are continuing expressions of school renewal" (p. 175). In general, the cognitive coaching model comprises a cyclic method of planning, observing, and reflecting. This three-step approach allows teachers to "explore the thinking behind their practices" (Garmston, Linder, & Whitaker, 1993, p. 57).

Cognitive coaching is unique in its focus on explicating teachers' internal thoughts, values, and beliefs rather than addressing their external behaviors, activities, or problems. The coaching process is specifically designed to be non-evaluative by supporting teachers' strengths while expanding unexplored capabilities. Ultimately, the goal of cognitive coaching is to give teachers the ability to self-manage, self-monitor, and self-analyze – that is, to develop teacher self-directedness (Costa & Garmston, 2002; Garmston, 1993). Because the entire coaching process is driven by teachers' desire for self-betterment (Cochran & DeChesere, 1995), cognitive coaching is considered to be an effective method for promoting professional development and change in the K-12 environment (Garmston, 1992; Showers & Joyce, 1996; Sullivan & Glanz, 2000).

Purpose of the study

Despite the amount of information available about how to implement a coaching program, little guidance is available regarding how to select and/or train coaches to achieve optimal success. What

knowledge, skills, and attitudes are needed? To what extent does the success of a peer coach depend on interpersonal skills, pedagogical and content-related knowledge, and/or a positive and professional attitude? Is one component more critical than the others?

This study was designed to determine what it takes to be a successful professional development coach, particularly from the coaches' view. Thus, we examined the perceptions of 31 instructional coaches to identify the critical skills and characteristics needed to achieve success. The specific research questions guiding data collection and analysis included:

- What characteristics and skills are needed to be a successful professional development coach?
- What strategies of coaching are perceived as being the most effective?
- What are the external factors that support or hinder effective coaching?

METHODS

Overview

Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered to examine coaches' perceptions of the knowledge, skills, and personal characteristics needed to be successful in their roles, as well as their concerns about facilitating the coaching initiative. One-on-one interviews served as the primary data source while survey, observation, and artifact data constituted secondary sources. Interview and observation data were analyzed to identify the skills and characteristics of effective coaches while survey data were used to gather demographic information as well as to identify coaches' specific concerns regarding the initiative. School district artifacts (e.g., project reports, training materials) were used, primarily, to triangulate findings from other sources.

Role of the Researchers

The study was designed and implemented by a team of seven graduate students, enrolled in an advanced educational technology research class, under the supervision of two faculty members. Students were primarily doctoral students (n = 6) and represented diverse backgrounds and interests including engineering, k-12 education, and corporate training. The research team worked collaboratively to identify the specific research focus and to create interview protocols and coding schemes. Each team member took

primary responsibility for collecting and analyzing data from a subgroup of four to five coaches. Weekly meetings and an online discussion board provided ongoing opportunities for team members to share ideas and make decisions regarding the research protocol.

Description of Site and Participants

The Harold School District (a pseudonym) is a large urban district in the Midwest that employs about 1,000 teachers and serves almost 16,000 students. After 6 months of planning, the district received a $5.9 million grant from a local funding agency to support a 3-year district renewal project, beginning in January 2002. The purpose of the project was to bring digital age literacies (e.g., basic, technological, visual, and informational) into the classroom environment, with a specific focus on the development of student self-direction and higher-order thinking. In order to build capacity, the district proposed reinventing itself as a professional learning community, which included the hiring and training of 34 digital age literacy leaders and coaches to assist teachers, dispersed across 18 buildings, in the understanding and classroom application of digital age literacy strategies.

Thirty-one coaches (27 females; 4 males) participated in the study. Each coach was hired from within the school system approximately a year before the study began and had been engaged in coaching activities for about 5 months. All coaches had participated in an initial 2-week summer training session in June, followed by an additional 2 weeks prior to the start of the 2002-2003 school year. Weekly training sessions, held every Friday at the central administration office, were provided throughout the school year.

Coaches had a variety of previous content-related experiences: Seventeen had been employed in positions directly related to literacy; four teachers had backgrounds in math, science, or music; other experiences related to leadership training, special education, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL; see Table 1). Years of teaching experience ranged from 6 to 32 years (M = 17.5). All but 8 coaches (3 of whom were coach leaders) worked in the same buildings in which they had previously taught.

Insert Table 1 about here

Data Collection and Analysis

In January 2003, participants completed the "Change Facilitator Stages of Concern Questionnaire" (CFSoCQ; Hall et al., 1991) comprised of 35 Likert scale items measuring 7 hypothesized stages of concerns (awareness, information, personal, management, consequence, collaboration, and refocusing) individuals have toward facilitating change. Coaches rated items from 1 (irrelevant to me) to 8 (very true of me now). Hall et al. reported coefficients of internal reliability for each of the six subscales (from awareness to refocusing), respectively: .63, .86, .65, .73, .74, .79, and .81, indicating moderate reliability. Participants also responded to 5 demographic questions such as years of teaching experience and experiences with other initiatives. As a final open-ended item, participants expressed their individual concerns about the specific literacy coaching initiative.

Face-to-face interviews were held in March 2003. In addition to providing supplementary demographic data, coaches described their personal definitions of coaching, elaborated on the critical skills and characteristics needed to be successful, and discussed concerns related to maintaining and/or increasing perceived levels of success. Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes, were audiotaped, and transcribed. Informal observations occurred throughout the semester including during the coaches' weekly training sessions, in the coaches' schools (e.g., while a coach was modeling a writing lesson for a classroom teacher), and during a culminating "show and tell" day in which a group of middle school teachers demonstrated skills and strategies they had learned (e.g., literature circles, questioning techniques, mathematics case studies). During each observation period, the researcher(s) took field notes that were then shared with the research team.

Secondary data were collected from district training materials, the project proposal, and semi-annual progress reports made to the funding agency. Training materials included relevant books, articles, handouts, and PowerPoint slides. The project proposal included a description of the rationale and goals for the project while progress reports included information describing specific activities and outcomes related to each of the project's three goals over the previous six months.

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Preliminary data analysis began in late January, after coaches completed the survey, and continued throughout the semester as additional data were gathered. Descriptive statistics were calculated from survey results in order to determine the "average" stage of concerns being experienced by the coaches. The interview data were analyzed using NUD*IST qualitative data analysis software. First, a coding schema was derived from the broad interview questions. After coding the 31 coach interviews, a search was conducted for recurring themes across interviews in order to describe participants' common perceptions of the skills and characteristics needed to be successful coaches.

Issues of Validity and Reliability

Reliability was increased through the use of consistent data collection methods. Each researcher used the same interview protocol to gather data from their assigned participants. Participants completed the survey online; data were electronically transferred to an Excel spreadsheet, thereby eliminating possible error in entering or organizing the data.

To increase validity, multiple data sources were used to triangulate findings. For example, survey results indicated which stages of concerns were most relevant to the participants at that particular point in time; interview comments verified the nature and extent of those concerns; observations during training sessions, in which coaches discussed their concerns with each other and with the program directors, provided additional evidence of the types of issues with which the coaches were dealing. By obtaining triangulations at various stages of data analysis, the validity of the research design was increased.

RESULTS

This study was designed to answer the overarching question, "What does it take to be a successful professional development coach?" To answer this question we examined participants' definitions of coaching as well as the characteristics, skills, and strategies they described as being necessary for success. Finally, we identified the external factors that the coaches believed had either supported or hindered their effectiveness.

Definition of Coaching

Participants were asked to define coaching and to describe what it takes to be successful. In general, the 31 coaches defined coaching as a collaborative process that aimed to improve teaching. Because cognitive coaching depends on the existence of strong relationships (Showers & Joyce, 1996), the majority of coaches indicated that they had yet to engage in true cognitive coaching. Rather, the first few months of the school year were spent establishing trust, primarily by serving as information resources for classroom teachers. This perception was supported by district reports: During the first year of the initiative, 45% of coaches' time (14,519 hours) was spent communicating, providing information, and offering training sessions or workshops, while 8% (2,851 hours) was spent in cognitive coaching. As one coach noted, "That [coaching] is a good piece; it's just we haven't got there. Very few people are experiencing that right now."

Perceptions of Effective Coaching Characteristics

Personal characteristics. While many of the coaches listed a variety of different characteristics and skills needed to be effective, the most frequently mentioned was that of "people skills." Twenty-four of the 31 coaches specifically talked about this, and many emphasized that it was the most important characteristic of all those mentioned. People skills, as discussed by the coaches, comprised additional skills such as building relationships, establishing trust and credibility, and having respect for others. For example, when asked, "What does it take to be a successful coach?" two coaches explained:

> … the [professional development] initiative is more interested and more geared to people who have good people skills rather than [literacy] expertise.

> … I think if you're not comfortable working with other people and you're not willing to do that give-and-take with people so that you're respecting their ideas and respecting where they're coming from, I don't think you could do it.

Many coaches (n = 11) emphasized the importance of being able to build relationships with teachers in their buildings. Sometimes this was done simply by having been in a particular building for

many years and having already established good relationships with their peers. Related to this, a majority of the coaches (n = 23) talked about the importance of credibility and a need for the teachers to respect them as individuals, as fellow teachers, and hopefully, as peer coaches.

> In the building where I was, I was already seen somewhat as a leader, as a professional. I think I've earned some internal respect, because I've been around [many] years in this building, so a lot of people knew me and had seen me in action, perhaps had begun to develop trust in me already, and I think that was beneficial, coming into this role.
>
> ... Teachers won't request help if they feel threatened or they feel as though they can't trust you. So the rapport has to be built first. I thing trust is very, very important.

Building a trusting relationship is a slow process that requires consistent effort. However, as mentioned by 11 coaches, trust can be difficult to build if teachers have misconceptions about the intended role of the coaches in the schools. In this case, misconceptions appeared to stem from the fact that teachers were not sure what purposes the coaches served or how they could help them individually. Some misconceptions included: coaches were computer technicians, coaches wouldn't know about a teacher's specific content area so they couldn't be helpful, coaches might evaluate the teachers, and coaches were earning "easy money" by not doing much. Two coaches explained:

> ... There's a whole number of teachers in the building who have not yet used us for a number of different reasons. You know, they're hesitant. They think because literacy is attached to the initiative that it's only about reading.
>
> ... I'd say the majority of the teachers here either don't care what we're doing or think we're probably not doing very much. But like I said, once they take the opportunity to work with us one-on-one or to try something that we've suggested and have a little conversation about it afterwards, they think it's a good thing.

Content expertise. A number of the coaches (n = 11) mentioned the need for a strong literacy background, whether it stemmed from a background in literacy in general, reading, language arts, or

English teaching experience. However, to some extent, coaches at the different grade levels perceived this differently. For example, four coaches mentioned the difficulty of working with high school teachers, particularly if they taught in specialized content areas. Coaches speculated that their job title, "Digital Literacy Coach," was misleading to some teachers who perceived that they did not need to work with coaches who seemed (from the teachers' view) to specialize in literacy only.

> I do think it's different, and I think that at the high school it's a little more … a little slower going than it has been in some of the elementary schools where every teacher, by nature, has a hand in literacy.
>
> … When you're a chemistry teacher, all you know is chemistry and that's what you teach and deliver all day long. It's been really hard for those high school coaches to get those teachers to see that even though your kids are learning chemistry, when it comes to answering questions on the test, it's important for them to write in complete sentences to answer them.

However, several coaches contended that the nature of the job did not require a literacy background. These coaches tended to think that whereas literacy expertise could be gained, it would be harder to gain the people skills needed to be successful if they were not already in place.

> Knowledge probably isn't the first priority, but people skills and relationships, I think are the number one skill. I believe that…and certainly now that I'm in [this role], it's a people skill, it's a people job.
>
> … I think if a district is starting this from scratch, I wouldn't look at content experts, I would look to the people who are the social leaders who people come to in the building. I would take those people and I would train them in the content. Because it's not about what you know in this job, it's about how you relate to people. … If you take a teacher who's been a teacher for 20 years, does a wonderful job with kids, but that teacher is … not the social leader in the building, that person will not be effective in this job. If you want to develop a successful initiative you need people who are very gregarious and outgoing, who are credible…

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Openness to continual development. Another important characteristic mentioned by many coaches (n = 15) was the need to be lifelong learners. Although not specifically mentioned by all coaches during their interviews, survey results confirmed that being open to continued development and lifelong leaning was an important characteristic. More than half of the coaches (n = 24, 77%) had earned a Masters degree, three were currently working toward their Masters, and seven (22.58%) had received endorsements in areas such as Special Education or Language Arts (see Table 1). Coaches described their previous and current efforts to stay on top of the research in their fields and/or seek out professional development opportunities to maintain their currency.

> I feel like I've worked with a lot with teachers, and worked with a lot of professional development. I feel like I have a lot of information because I keep pretty current with reading and going to conferences myself.

> … I previously had quite a bit of professional development. I'm a self-directed learner, so I knew that I would … I would seek out things that would benefit me professionally... I felt like I had many of [those] characteristics…as well as the self-directedness of wanting to always learn professionally.

Additional skills and characteristics mentioned by a smaller number of coaches included previous experiences providing professional development (n = 10), comfort with technology (n = 5), enthusiasm (n = 7), and being a risk-taker or experimenting with teaching and learning in their own classrooms (n = 3).

Perceptions of Effective Coaching Strategies

As might be expected, many of the coaching strategies considered to be most effective were those that built upon the characteristics and skills previously described, such as building relationships of trust through the use of strong people skills. Additional strategies such as treating the teachers as peers, working as equals beside them, and learning together were also mentioned. One coach explained:

> Being willing to say that you don't know everything; to say, "Let's explore, research, and learn this together." Letting people see that you don't know everything or you don't think you know

everything. It's kind of like exposing who you are and your strengths and weaknesses. That's not always easy.

Communication strategies comprised another important category of strategies used by the coaches. Eight coaches specifically described the need for good communication strategies.

> You've got to have communication; [it's] so important that you can communicate with your peers, with teachers who are making changes, and then with the administration -- to be able to communicate well with all of them, to let them know what direction you're going and what you feel good about and what you need their support with.

Assuming a non-evaluative role and maintaining confidentiality were also perceived as being critical strategies for achieving success. As two coaches pointed out:

> I think the most important thing is to build rapport with the staff. To not come on too strong, because I think that when you do that, you alienate them. … It's very slow at first …they have to feel comfortable with you, they have to feel like you are in a non-threatening position and that you are not evaluating them.
>
> … Confidentiality is huge, too. When at all possible, when I talk to my principal, I talk about "I have a group of teachers who are doing this" or "I have a grade level that wants to do this" and I don't talk about what I see room to room ... That was something that I broadcast at the beginning, that I wasn't going to take it back to [the principal] … so I think that's huge, confidentiality.

A final strategy mentioned by at least seven coaches included being prepared and demonstrating confidence in the knowledge being brought to the teachers.

> Number one, you have to be knowledgeable about what's going on –'What is best practice in education today?' - so that I don't tell my teachers to do something and then have it be terribly unsuccessful in their classrooms and then have them say, "What did you have me try that for? That did not work at all!" I have to be knowledgeable about what's happening in education today.

Perceptions of Factors Impacting Coaching

Administrative support. Coaches were asked to describe the external factors that both supported and hindered their work. Not surprisingly, coaches perceived that having supportive administrators was an important factor affecting the success of the initiative. This included district, as well as school and project leadership. In general, coaches valued the principals' and grant administrators' willingness to work with them and maintain open relationships among all stakeholders. However, four coaches, each from different buildings, discussed their discontent with the leadership styles of their particular principals. The two major problems, perceived by the coaches in these cases, were the principals' lack of knowledge and understanding of the purposes of the initiative and differing opinions between the coaches and the principals about how teachers should receive help from the coaches. For example, coaches expressed concerns about principals mandating that the teachers in their buildings use them. The coaches believed that this created a negative atmosphere around the coaches in general, and about requesting help from them, specifically.

> You have to have leadership that understands the initiative. And we don't … one of the major frustrations for us is that we are doing very good things, and we're making inroads with individual teachers, but it makes us very sad and frustrated to know where this could go if we had a leader who truly understood … the principal has not done a good job of sharing the vision of why the township is doing this.
>
> … I think that the principal is forcing people to use us and I don't know if that's the best thing. The principal required some people to come and work with us. So requiring someone instead of inviting someone, can take on a very different feeling.

These comments are supported by survey results that indicated that the coaches' primary concerns related to the "consequence" and "collaboration" stages of concern. The average responses on these subscales (M = 5.64/8.00 and 6.77/8.00, respectively) were 2.5-3 points higher than any of the other 6 stages; coaches rated the statements as being "somewhat true of me now." Consequence items

addressed how the coaches' facilitation efforts affected those around them (e.g., "I am concerned about how my facilitation affects those directly involved in this initiative."). Collaboration items related to concerns about coordinating efforts with others (e.g., "I would like to help others in facilitating this initiative.").

Initial and ongoing training. Twenty-one coaches indicated that the initial training they received during summer 2002 was valuable, and in particular, they appreciated learning more about strategies for reading and writing (n = 12). Coaches felt that the in-depth literacy training prepared them to work more effectively with the teachers. Training on cognitive coaching was noted as being especially valuable by five coaches. Its value seemed to come from the fact that it helped the coaches see how all the other skills tied together as well as how this new information could be shared with the teachers through the cognitive coaching process.

> For me, a lot of training on reading strategies was helpful because a lot of people who have taught English before had already had some of that, or had quite a bit of that, so (they) were using those things. For my background, I really hadn't talked about that. So that was interesting… to really look at the reading strategies.

> … I think the cognitive coaching process has been really important to me. In order to do the cognitive coaching you have to have all the other things we have learned. You have to know the self-directedness, you have to know the writing process, you have to know the reading process, and all the other things that have been brought to us in order to do that process. So, out of all the things so far, that coaching piece is the most important for me.

Eight coaches described how increases in their knowledge and skills, especially those related to literacy, technology, and adult learning, had increased their confidence in their coaching abilities. Three coaches perceived that improvement in leadership skills enabled them to be more effective because coaching required high levels of interactivity with the teachers.

> I think I'm definitely better at presenting, definitely better at learning how to relate and do this job with adults versus doing the job with kids, which I had done for so long. It's different.
>
> ... I think leadership skills, for one, have been really developed. When I first [started], I thought I was going to pass out and die for nervousness but it's gotten a lot better and I feel a little better about my leadership skills and about being perceived as a leader in the building.

While initial training sessions helped coaches develop a shared understanding of the digital age literacy initiative and provided some much needed instruction in specific reading and coaching strategies, ten coaches indicated that subsequent, ongoing training sessions were equally, if not more, valuable in supporting their efforts to *apply* these newly learned skills in their buildings. Whereas other approaches to professional development often lead to the development of skills that are quickly forgotten (e.g., Pierce & Hunsaker, 1996), attending training every Friday provided the coaches with the timely information they needed. Then, after having the chance to implement these new skills during the week, they would gather once again and reflect on how well these new skills had been applied and consider ways to improve.

> Training has been just what we need when we need it. We're always kind of on the verge of what you know, you go, you learn, and you go back and you apply it, and then we get a little bit more, so we're always being pushed to the next level.

However, not all of the training was perceived as valuable. Although some coaches thought the training on literacy and cognitive coaching was very helpful, other coaches (n = 7) thought the opposite, primarily because of the way it was presented. In general, coaches objected to one-way presentations being made by outside experts who were unaware, or unable, to help the coaches understand how the information applied to their jobs.

> The thing that has been the least valuable probably [has] been the cognitive coaching. ... the speaker they brought in, or the presenter, has been terrible. Instead of getting on board, everybody has just been turned off.

Finally, five coaches described being frustrated by the lack of content differentiation in the training sessions for different levels of coaches. Coaches have a wide range of backgrounds, including teaching experiences, content area knowledge, professional development experiences, and technology skills. Coaches recommended that the trainers be more aware of the different levels of skills and knowledge and provide training accordingly.

> The least valuable for me has been how to design web pages, or how to design PowerPoint, or a presentation. Been there, done that.

Peer support. At least eight coaches indicated that interacting with the other coaches was beneficial to their success; many other coaches corroborated this idea during informal conversations. Exchanging ideas, making suggestions, and "bouncing off ideas" were all part of a group of strategies referred to by some coaches as building a professional learning community.

> At the elementary level, we've tried to put [the coaches] into professional learning communities with each other because they're the only ones in the building who do what they do. For some of them, that's been very helpful.
>
> ...I've gotten to know the other coaches better. I can also email them or say, "Hey help me out with this." ... I think just the coaching group themselves will continue to support me ... it's a wonderful group of people and very helpful with great ideas ... I've appreciated that group of experts.

Weekly training sessions provided ongoing opportunities for the coaches to interact with each other. Discussions, debates, and question-answer sessions provided time for the coaches to process new information and enabled them to learn from each other.

DISCUSSION

While the job description for the digital age literacy coach position emphasized the need for strong literacy and technology skills, the coaches in this study perceived that the primary criteria that affected their success was their ability to work with others, that is, their interpersonal skills. The majority

of the coaches, including both those *with* and *without* literacy expertise, listed interpersonal skills as being the most important. Given the emphasis placed on this aspect by the coaches in this study, it is important to consider how we might better measure or define "people skills" so that other school districts, hoping to duplicate the success of this initiative, can be successful also. This is especially true for district administrators who need to hire coaches who are not currently employed within their districts. Moreover, while these characteristics tend to be subjective, and while some coaches indicated that they developed these characteristics once they were situated within their positions, how can we effectively identify those who will be able to accomplish such a task? One answer to this might be found by examining, more closely, the few coaches (n = 8) in this study who were not placed within their own buildings, but were placed in buildings where they knew few, if any, of the teachers located there. Coaches' perceptions of the skills and strategies that enabled them to establish these initial relationships could provide a useful starting point for identifying underlying characteristics that might be expected to facilitate future success.

While many of the coaches (n = 11) in this study believed that a literacy background was important to being successful as a digital age literacy coach, several others disagreed. These coaches believed that literacy content expertise could be gained through professional development and training, such as that provided by the initiative. Further comparisons between the successes of coaches with literacy vs. non-literacy backgrounds might help us determine the relative importance of having a strong content knowledge base vs. having a strong pedagogical knowledge base. Can strong coaching skills overcome a less-developed knowledge base? Can knowledge of effective teaching strategies, and expertise in one content area, make up for a lack of specific knowledge in another content area? If, as the literature suggests, the entire coaching process is driven by teachers' desire for self-betterment (Cochran & DeChesere, 1995), perhaps success is more dependent on the characteristics of the *recipients,* rather than the *providers,* of the coaching. Thus, teachers' participation in this type of initiative might depend more on fostering a culture of seeking personal improvement than on the professional backgrounds of the coaches. These are fruitful areas for future research.

When asked to describe effective coaching strategies, the coaches in this study described how they used strategies to gain the trust and support of the teachers. These strategies included building relationships, communication strategies, assuming a non-evaluative role, and maintaining confidentiality. It is interesting to note that none of the coaches mentioned specific strategies they could use during cognitive coaching sessions or within the K-12 classrooms they were hoping to impact. Still, considering that this research took place during the first year of the coaching initiative, these relationship-building strategies may simply comprise the foundation upon which subsequent strategies will be based. In other words, the strategies that coaches described may change as the initiative continues, with the expectation that different strategies will become more prominent as the coaches enter different phases of implementation. For example, many of the coaches in this study expressed frustration regarding the relatively small amount of cognitive coaching they had been able to provide. Yet they also recognized that this was not something that either they, or the teachers, could just jump into. Perhaps as the emphasis shifts to include more cognitive coaching, other skills and strategies will take center stage. We intend to document and report on these future changes.

Recent recommendations in the professional development literature (Grant, 1996; Little, 1993), outlining essential characteristics of successful programs, have advocated a change in emphasis from the development of skills to the development of a learning community. Yet, the coaches in this study found the majority of their training sessions, including the intensive summer skills training, to be valuable. In general, coaches described gaining increased knowledge, skills, and confidence as a result of the training sessions. Still, one of the most important aspects of the weekly training sessions, as cited by the coaches, was the opportunity to interact with one another, to build camaraderie, and to receive support from one another. Thus the training sessions, themselves, became an important vehicle for developing the learning community advocated in the literature. As noted by Morris, Chrispeels, and Burke (2003), teacher professional networks that focus on enhancing teachers' pedagogical knowledge and collaborative leadership skills can alter "teacher learning in profound and sustainable ways" (p. 764).

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Still, coaches provided a number of suggestions for improving the training. For example, seven coaches mentioned that they did not find the cognitive coaching sessions valuable, but upon further conversation it was discovered that this was not because of the material, but rather the presentation style. In general, the coaches objected to one-way presentations. Given the nature of their coaching jobs, and the strategies they, themselves, found effective, it is not surprising that they preferred sessions that allowed for communication between the presenter(s) and the coaches, as well as among the coaches. In addition, several coaches (n = 5) talked about the lack of content differentiation in the training sessions that would be difficult to accommodate, given the backgrounds of the coaches. However, one suggestion might be to assign various roles during the training sessions that engage the "experts" in a way that benefits all coaches, such as assisting in the training. In fact, this approach was used during a subsequent training session devoted to cognitive coaching and appeared to be more widely accepted by the coaches.

Finally, many of the difficulties that coaches perceived as hindering their efforts were related to misconceptions, either by teachers in the schools or by their administrators. As previously mentioned, at least four coaches implied that there was a stigma attached to the term "literacy" at the high school level, leaving them to convince high school teachers that literacy is a general skill that needs to be incorporated across the curriculum, and something that would benefit even the more specialized subject areas, such as science and math. Similarly, but on a larger scale, was the perceived misconception of administrators about the initiative and how to go about facilitating it within their own schools. Four coaches discussed the problems they perceived as resulting from the administrators' lack of understanding or knowledge of the initiative as well as how the coaches should go about doing their jobs. These misconceptions, according to the coaches, resulted in a negative atmosphere surrounding them, either because teachers were mandated to work with them or because the coaches lost credibility in the eyes of the peers, the teachers. Perhaps the best way to overcome these misconceptions or barriers, and the coaches' biggest hindrances, would be to have an internal marketing plan in place, and/or to provide additional training, that targets the administrators and teachers so that they better understand the role and purpose of the initiative. Thus far a significant portion of this initiative has been directed at preparing the coaches for

their positions, assisting them as they engage in the coaching process, and helping them build strong relationships with the rest of the coaching staff. It may be that more work needs to be done with the administrative staff to help them understand the initiative and then, to effectively communicate this understanding with their staff. If effective staff development requires building a community in which goals are aligned with everyone in the school district (NSDC, 2001, Standard 1) then these misconceptions, if not addressed, could prove more of a hindrance than anticipated.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Due to the timing of this study, the focus of this research was somewhat narrow. This, then, limits our ability to generalize the findings to other situations. Due to that fact that the study was undertaken fairly soon after the initiative was implemented, some perceptions may have been skewed because not enough time had passed to allow for proper reflection or to assess the true impact of the coaches' efforts.

This study represents the first in a series designed to examine the long-term success of the peer coaching program. Because this research focused almost exclusively on the perceptions of the coaches, it will be important to triangulate these results with the perspectives of other stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, and students. Finally, with the ultimate goal of professional development being an increase in student achievement, it will be important to examine real differences in student learning outcomes as a result of the initiative. Results, then, can inform the efforts of other school districts that wish to implement similar programs.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

As might be expected, coaches play a myriad of roles within their schools and thus, need a variety of skills to be effective. Based on the early experiences of 31 coaches in one school district, interpersonal skills appear to play a key role, especially when a coaching initiative is first introduced and implemented. Whereas content knowledge can be taught, coaches perceived that interpersonal skills were a critical prerequisite. This is supported by McKenzie's (2001; 2002) work with technology coaches and has implications for school districts who must recruit, prepare, and support the growth of effective coaches: "While it is tempting to hire impressively advanced pioneers as coaches, the most important criteria have

to do with the diplomacy, tact, and relationship building necessary to win the confidence and trust of partners" (McKenzie, 2001, ¶ 9).

How can we begin to reconcile the contrasting views between what is more important: content expertise or interpersonal skills? Perhaps it is not an either-or situation, but a complementary relationship that works as long as a balance exists between the two. And so, what advice can we provide to others who are considering the use of peer coaches for professional development purposes? How should a district select and support coaches so as to ensure their success? According to the coaches in this study, the most important things to consider include interpersonal skills, a strong background in teaching (which may or may not include literacy at the outset), knowledge of best practices, leadership skills, administrative support, and the support of peers. Although these skills, characteristics, and support structures may not exist in equal proportions in every coach or in every coaching situation, it appears as though one should search for a reasonably balanced mix.

As educators continue to search for ways to increase student achievement through "new and improved" professional development efforts, peer coaching appears to offer one strategy for building a professional learning community among its members. As one of the coaches wrote, in an article for the School Boards Association (Bardonner, 2003), "Creating a collaborative culture, a professional community of learners, moves teachers from an isolated, private classroom practice to a shared, focused collaboration that converges on results and student-centered learning" (p. 5). This, then, is our hope for the future of this, as well as other, coaching programs being implemented around the country.

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Table 1.

Demographic Data for Digital Literacy Coaches (n = 28) and Coach Leaders (n = 3)

Current Coaching Position	Yrs Tchg Exp	Own Bldg	Advanced Degree	Relevant Previous Experiences
Elementary school coach	6	Y	Masters	Adjunct college instructor Literacy training
High school coach	6	Y	Masters	Math teacher
Elementary coach leader	7	N	Masters +	Reading Recovery teacher leader
High school coach leader	9	Y	---	Science teacher
High school coach	9	Y	---	English teacher
Kindergarten coach	9	Y	B.S. +	Kindergarten teacher Professional development trainer
Middle school coach	10	N	---	Language arts teacher
ESOL district coach	10	N	Masters	English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
Elementary school coach	10	Y	Masters	Literacy Professional development trainer

(table continues)

Table 1. (continued)

Current Coaching Position	Yrs Tchg Exp	Own Bldg	Advanced Degree	Relevant Previous Experiences
Elementary school coach	11	Y	Masters	Four Blocks reading training
Middle school coach	12	Y	Masters	Math teacher
High school coach	13	Y	Masters	English teacher
Elementary school coach	13	Y	B.S. +	Title 1 reading
Special education district coach	13	N	Masters	College instructor Special education
Elementary school coach	17	Y	Masters	Gifted and talented endorsement Professional development trainer
Elementary school coach	17	Y	Masters	Literacy training
Elementary school coach	17	Y	Masters	Teacher leadership academy Gifted and talented endorsement
High school coach	18	N	Masters	English teacher

(table continues)

Table 1. (continued)

Current Coaching Position	Yrs Tchg Exp	Own Bldg	Advanced Degree	Relevant Previous Experiences
Elementary school coach	20	Y	Masters	Professional development trainer
Elementary school coach	20	Y	Masters	Teacher leadership academy Elementary principal's license
Middle school coach	23	Y	Masters +	Special education
Elementary school coach	23	N	Masters	Professional development coach for state
Middle school coach	25	Y	Masters	Title 1 reading teacher
Middle school coach	25	Y	Masters	Language arts teacher Masters in reading education
Elementary school coach	25	Y	Masters	Literacy training
Middle school coach leader	26	N	B. S. +	Professional development trainer Language arts endorsement
Middle school coach	27	Y	Masters	Music and technology teacher

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

Current Coaching Position	Yrs Tchg Exp	Own Bldg	Advanced Degree	Relevant Previous Experiences
High school coach	29	Y	---	English teacher College instructor (Eng. Composition)
Middle school coach	30	Y	Masters	Language arts teacher
Elementary school coach	30	Y	Masters	Teacher leadership academy
High school coach	32	N	Masters +	Language Arts teacher
Average/Totals	17.48	N = 8 Y = 23	MS = 24	Literacy/LA/Eng/Rdg = 17 Math/Sci = 3 Music/Tech = 1 ESOL = 1 Professional Dev/ Leadership = 7 Sp Ed = 2

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